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ABSTRACT

All educational evaluations share common problems, perplexities, and political considerations. Logistic problems include incomplete definition of purpose, unclear timelines and personnel allocations, inadequate support services, and the lack of a program plan. Interpersonal dynamics and conflicts plus unwieldy committee structures are perplexities that add to the evaluation controversy. Related political aspects include the conflict between professional work ethics and actual work behavior; obstacles provided by union control; the selection of the evaluator or committee chairperson; short-term responses to political pressures; and the evaluation presentation format and forum. A need exists for establishing a firm structure and outline before beginning an educational program evaluation. Nine recommendations are provided as guides for that process. (GJ)

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PROBLEMS, PERPLEXITIES, AND POLITICS OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Abstract

This paper is based on observations made while conducting an evaluation of the implementation of the middle school concept within a large urban school district. This evaluation experience provided the basis for a discussion of the logistic problems, personnel issues, and politics of conducting evaluations of educational programs. The paper concludes with recommendations for effective evaluation designs.

PROBLEMS, PERPLEXITIES, AND POLITICS OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

In the past two years, numerous reports have been issued which have criticized the status and quality of American public schools. The result has been that many public school districts are in the process of evaluating existing educational programs in order to plan for more effective schools. These evaluations range in design from haphazard to well organized; however, regardless of magnitude, all educational evaluations share common problems, perplexities, and political considerations.

Problems

Purpose of Evaluation

Although the decade of the 1980's might well be remembered as the age of educational evaluation, great controversy remains about what evaluation entails and how it should be used (Hamby, 1983). Therefore, in order to begin an evaluation, evaluators must obtain directions as to the desired extent and scope of the evaluation. Clarification on this issue may come from federal or state funding agencies, the local school board, or superordinates within the organization. On a simplistic level, the first question to be addressed is whether the evaluation is intended to be formative or summative in nature. If formative, the basic purpose may be to answer questions about school-system status, input variables, and implementation design rather than about outcomes such as changes in student achievement, attitudes, or behaviors (Hayman & Napier, 1975; Tuckman, 1979). In addition, formative evaluation can provide a framework for observing the development or growth of a program toward specific goals, reveal points of

tension or program dysfunction that exist as the result of structural-organizational or human-emotional issues, and pinpoint discrepancies between program objectives and activities that are occurring (Hayman & Napier, 1975). Frequently, the intent of the evaluation is to provide an answer to demands for accountability or a justification to for expensive curriculum projects. Thus, evaluations may include both formative (process) and summative (outcome) techniques.

Timelines and Personnel Allocations

In addition to a lack of clear purpose, evaluators are frequently requested (or directed) to conduct an evaluation of a program without being fully apprised of the timelines and personnel allocations. Regardless of whether the evaluator is an internal staff member or external consultant, specific timelines must be established in order to allow for the development of an outline of evaluation activities which will satisfy the purpose(s) of the evaluation. Related to the issue of time constraints are questions regarding work schedules. If the evaluation is being conducted by a staff member, clarification as to work load and regular responsibilities must be obtained; and if the evaluator is an external consultant, agreement must be reached regarding the number of hours necessary to complete the task.

Support Services

Another logistic problem centers around available support services such as secretarial assistance and data processing. Frequently unanticipated conflicts occur over such simple issues as typing of the document, material retrieval, and data gathering. Therefore, administrators must recognize the

need for delineation and assignment of these tasks in order to avoid confusion and conflict. In addition, a preferred document style which suits the intended receiving audience should be specified. If possible access to word processing should be obtained in order to expedite draft revisions. Without these support services, evaluators are hampered in initiating the evaluation; and thus, valuable time is wasted as the evaluator grapples with these technical issues.

Program Planning Document

Once the ground rules have been established, evaluators must locate all existing documents regarding the program to be evaluated. Unfortunately, educational organizations have been notorious for their failure to formulate formal plans for educational programs. All too often a program was the brainchild of a certain individual and the program was approved and financed based on the organization's trust in that individual. As a result, when the program director leaves, those to whom the program is entrusted do not have access to well developed program plans and descriptions. In addition, the evaluator is faced with the need to reconstruct history before actually beginning the evaluation process.

The lack of program plans also means that the evaluator does not have access to formal progam goals and objectives of the program. Therefore, criteria of effectiveness have generally not been established and data have not been collected in a timely manner. The result is that the evaluator must formulate the goals, determine measurement criteria, and, if possible, obtain data which will determine whether the goals have been met. It is important to stress that process approaches to evaluation which emphasize

description and interpretation do not reject quantitative data nor suggest that, in paying more attention to the process, outcomes be neglected (Simons cited in McCormick, 1982). Thus, the basic premise that evaluation is wider than evaluation must be established.

Perplexities

Involvement in Decision Making

Throughout the educational administrative literature, theorists have stressed the necessity for administrators (in these cases, evaluators) to appropriately involve individuals in decisions which affect them. Basically, if individuals possess interest and knowledge about the program in review, they should be afforded opportunities to be involved in the evaluation process. Failure to do so may result in recommendations, conclusions, or decisions falling outside of their "zone of acceptance" (Hoy & Miskel, 1982). If this occurs, these individuals may resist program suggestions based more on the fact that they are offended by being excluded from the process than that they disagree with the conclusions.

As a result, most evaluations are conducted by the evaluator with the assistance of an evaluation committee. This committee is usually comprised of individuals who are involved and knowledgeable of the program under study. The very fact that these individuals are directly involved raises questions regarding their objectivity. Therefore, in order to balance the presentation of viewpoints and to discourage bias, the committee may include participants who are not directly involved in the program. Thus, evaluators are not only faced with the previously mentioned logistic problems but must now deal with the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics and conflicts.

External Participants

The issue of involvement becomes more perplexing when the evaluator is expected to include individuals from outside the organization in the evaluation process. In educational evaluations, parents are often representative of external participants. These external participants present additional concerns for the evaluator in that they frequently are not familiar with the total operation of the organization or the program itself; and therefore, considerable time must be spent educating them.

Although this wide-ranging involvement of both internal and external participants in the evaluation process is appealing on an intuitive and theoretical level, the reality is that the end result is often an unwieldy committee structure. The evaluator, in order to cope with the size of the resultant committee, is often compelled to create a subcommittee structure which raises new management issues. This frequently extensive involvement slows the evaluative process and sidetracks discussions at committee meetings while the evaluator attempts to inform the total committee of the subcommittees' work.

Politics

Time and Professional Ethics

Time often affects the quality of evaluative reports. Conducting an evaluation requires that the evaluator holds committee meetings and meets with other relevant individuals. Unfortunately, beyond the physical time allocated for meetings, time is expended and must be available for preparing the written portions of the evaluation report. Work must be delegated at the committee meetings, since the primary purposes of these meetings will be

information sharing, brainstorming, and consensus building. Given the diverse interests of committee participants, little time will be available for the funtional aspects of generating the evaluation report. Therefore, the evaluator must be realistic about the time constraints under which they are operating.

Frequently, if adequate time is not allowed for conducting a thorough evaluation, staff members contend that the process was purposefully manipulated by the governing board. The error may be made in either direction. If too little time is provided, the observation is that the board or administrator is not taking the evaluation seriously; and, if too much time is allocated, the same criticism is made and program participants feel that the program's evaluation is not receiving proper attention.

Professional work ethics and actual work behavior often conflict in the mind of the evaluator. The evaluator assumes that those participating on the evaluation committee are committed to the task at hand and willing to contribute to the final product. However, in many instances, participants view their roles as information providers and program protector. Therefore, they attend meetings to protect their vested interests in the program and to assure their constituents that they are doing so. The end result is that participants are more than willing to use release time from their duties to attend meetings and discuss the issues; however, they seldom volunteer to complete tasks which must be done outside of the formal meetings such as data collection and analysis and report writing. Consequently, the evaluator is burdened with the bulk of the evaluative task.

Unionism

In addition to general work ethics, union control often provides obstacles to the program evaluator. The collective bargaining agreement in many school districts defines the boundaries of the work day. Therefore, the evaluator is constrained in establishing committee and informational meetings. At certain stages of the evaluation process, evening meetings are often necessary; however, the contract often restricts this posssibility unless teachers who are participating receive compensation. Thus, the evaluator must attempt to complete the evaluative task within the "typical" work day although this may not best suit the design or intensity of the project. In the final analysis, the evaluator attends all meetings, holds all informational hearings, collects and analysizes data, and writes the drafts and final report. The risks are that the evaluator will be perceived as controlling the process and ignoring input and the receiving audiences will reject the findings although they were afforded ample opportunity for involvement.

Selection of Evaluators

Another political aspect of evaluation is the selection of the evaluator or committee chairperson. Logically, this person might be the program director; however, frequently the task is delegated to an individual who does not have vested interests in the program. The intention is that the final report will be more objective than it would be if conducted by an internal program participant. Part of the problem is that external evaluators and program participants often work from different frames of reference and this is not always appreciated by either group. The evaluator

needs to discover the viewpoints of those involved and arrive at some common view of what is being assessed and how assessments are to be judged (Dean cited in McCormick, 1982).

When an external evaluator is engaged caution must be taken to insure that all aspects of the program or program sites receive equal attention. Program participants will expect that they receive individual attention although the evaluator may feel that he/she has observed or visited a valid sample of locations. Thus, the evaluator, for political reasons, may find it necessary to provide more individual attention than the evaluation plan demands. By so doing, those visited may view the findings as more credible; however, the evaluator pays the price in terms of time investment. The reality is that the credibility, authenticity, and motives of the external evaluator are questioned by those involved in program delivery. Therefore, in cases of external review, additional time must be allowed for the evaluator to become acquainted with the program and win the trust of the program personnel.

Evaluation Intent

The major justification for school evaluation is enhanced professionalism and it is best introduced as a continuous part of professional practice, not as a short-term response to political pressures. However,

> Many evaluators can recount stories of evaluations that became political tools. When programs are controversial and stakes are high, program evaluations are political acts and evaluators and their reports are used, abused, or ignored depending on how well their findings serve

political agendas.

> The salience and validity of evaluation, then, depends on its ability to make sense within the dominant conceptualization of the problem and connect with the values of those who have the power to define the problems and range of options for action. (Marshall, 1985, p. 411)

Evaluation Presentation

The final political consideration relates to the presentation format and forum. Politically astute evaluators carefully appraise the political climate of the organization and determine the most advantageous delivery system. If evaluation is to be effective, it must be viewed as enhancing or, at least, non-threatening by the one(s) evaluated (Hamby, 1983); therefore, evaluators must often make various presentations to a number of constituent groups. Since individual groups will have differing concerns, these multiple presentations although time consuming for the evaluator provide the best opportunity for clarifying the intent and implications of the evaluative findings. In so doing, care must be taken to not overestimate nor underestimate the competence of the receiving audience. Evaluators, therefore, must design the evaluation format to suit the receivers while maintaining the integrity of the evaluation.

Recommendations for Effective Evaluation Designs

The preceding comments indicate that a need exists for establishing a firm structure and outline before beginning an evaluation of an educational program. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

1. The evaluator must meet with the governing board/administrators of the organization in order to identify the purpose of the evaluation.
2. The evaluator should establish a list of evaluation activities, identify those who will be responsible, and formulate a timeline for completion of the evaluation activities.
3. Appropriate support services must be secured.
4. When initiating educational programs, planners must develop thorough program planning documents which include specific goals, processes, and outcomes. In addition the planning documents need to include evaluation criteria.
5. In determining the evaluation committee structure, care must be taken to insure representative participation while avoiding the establishment of a committee of unreasonable size. Fluid participation may be more reasonable than constant.
6. Role responsibilities and duties must be clearly delineated to committee members in order that they fully understand the extent of their contributions.
7. External evaluators should only be used as committee chairpersons in instances where objectivity is of paramount concern. They may better serve the evaluation process as committee participants, consultants, or reviewers.
8. Evaluators must clearly understand the political climate of the organization.
9. The final evaluation report must be presented in a form which is readily understood by those receiving it.

The above recommendations may not remove all the controversy which surrounds the evaluation of educational programs; however, clarification of these issues will allow for school personnel to better understand the evaluation process as a productive and positive part of the developmental process of the educational program.

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